



How to write an editorial letter?

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ABSTRACT

In most journals, there are letters or answers sections. Letters to the editor are usually a type of short communication that can be written on any topic that attracts the attention of the readers. Although articles are stringently vetted before publication in a journal, some issues can still go unnoticed. In this situation, readers can offer their interpretations by writing a letter to the editor. Thus, letters are also a control mechanism that facilitates progress after an article has been published. One of the most important aspects of a letter to the editor is that it must be short. It is known that a letter is more easily accessible to readers when the message is short and brief. The letter to the editor or author must make reference to objectives or discussions on medical, scientific or general topics that may attract attention. A letter must have a purpose, and it should convey its message in a short and definitive fashion.

Key words: Editor; how to write; letter.

Introduction

Many journals contain “Letters”, and “Responses” sections.^[1] Letter to the editor is generally a short form of communication, and it can be written on every topic which attracts the attention of the readers. For most of the journals, letters are important, and they are published under the surveillance of the editor. The most frequent reason for writing a letter to the editor is to comment on a published article.^[1] However, these interpretations should be objective, and constructive comments, and the authors of this article are invited to respond to these letters (author’s response to the letter). Though the most frequent reason of writing a letter to the editor is to make a comment on a previously published article, also research reports, case reports, case series or an adverse reaction to a drug can be reported as a letter.

Why are letters so important?

Articles published in an article are reviewed carefully, and meticulously. However sometimes misleading materials, and errors can be overlooked by the editors before publication of the article. In these conditions readers send a letter to the editor indicating their comments about the article, and thus control mechanism in a way proceeds even after publication of the article.^[2] International Committee of Medical

Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends publication of these letters in journals together with their answers.^[3] Besides, some of MEDLINE-indexed journals print these letters with their responses under the title of original articles to prevent their escape from the attention of the readers.

Types of Letters

The purpose of the letter demonstrates differences among journals (Figure 1). Many letters include comments on a previously published article. Comprehensive or concise reports which do not necessarily contain all details of a report can be expressed in a letter format.^[4]

While sending a letter to a journal, priorly the following questions should be answered. What is the purpose of your letter? Is the format of your letter suitable to the format of the journal? Is your subject matter really worth mentioning?

Analyzing format, and contents of the letters published in the journal, and examining recently published examples in the target journal are two important steps to be achieved before writing a letter. Since information delivered in a letter will be naturally restricted, a long list of authors should not be given. Before forwarding the letter it will be reasonable to inquire the contents of the manuscript. In fact,

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Submitted:
06.03.2013

Accepted:
23.05.2013

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comments, and observations without any significance will not be published.^[5]

One of the important points involving the writing phase involves preparation of a brief, and concise letter. Indeed editors are fond of concise, and clear-cut letters. They prefer to publish ten short letters rather than two long letters. It is a known fact that if the message to be delivered is brief and concise, it will be understood more easily by the readers. This issue has been demonstrated by two following exemplary letters.

Dear Editor,

I have read the review article entitled “Medical Expulsive Treatment for Ureteral Stones” by Atan A, and Tuncel A published in *The Turkish Journal of Urology* (2010;36 (3): 302-8). I want to congratulate the authors for this successful review article, and make some contributions.

In the review article, it has been indicated that medical expulsive therapy is not indicated in patients with solitary kidney, renal dysfunction, hydronephrosis due to prolonged obstruction, persistent pain, and those with a risk of active urinary system infection, and urosepsis, and in some jobs (pilots, and mariners). I think that pregnant, and pediatric patients should be included in these patient groups. In pregnant, efficacy, and safety of expulsive treatment with alpha blockers, and calcium channel blockers have not been established yet. Therefore expulsive treatment in pregnant does not seem to be a suitable alternative. Even though alpha blockers have been used in the pediatric patient groups with persistent voiding dysfunction, neuropathic bladder, and idiopathic urethritis, guidelines of American Urological Association, and European Association of Urology do not contain recommendations about use of medical expulsive treatment for ureteral stones in pediatric patients.

Format of the Letters to the Editor and Related Rules

Letter is an acceptable format for making comments on an article published in previously published issues of the same journal. Sometimes the letter may be related to an article published in a different journal. Letters are always written to the editor, they are never addressed to the first authors. In this case, editor assumes an objective role of a mediator between the authors with potential conflicting attitudes towards each other.

The purpose of a letter written in response to a previously published study is to support or mostly criticize the justification, analysis or outcome of the study.^[5] If the purpose is to criticize, then conspicuous, and evidence-based criticisms should be made (Table 1). Still, comprehensively handled issues in the criticized article should not be reviewed again. A contrary approach will diminish the quality of the letter. As a very important approach, the letter should point out to new, not previously considered

Table 1. A guideline for writing a comment letter on a published article

Do not assume a rude, and pejorative attitude
Must be courteous and related
Make specific rather than general comments
Instead of biased opinions, your comments should be based on scientific evidence
Do not repeat topics which was studied in the original article
Approach the subject matter from a different perspective
Present additional data
Use a brief and concise wording

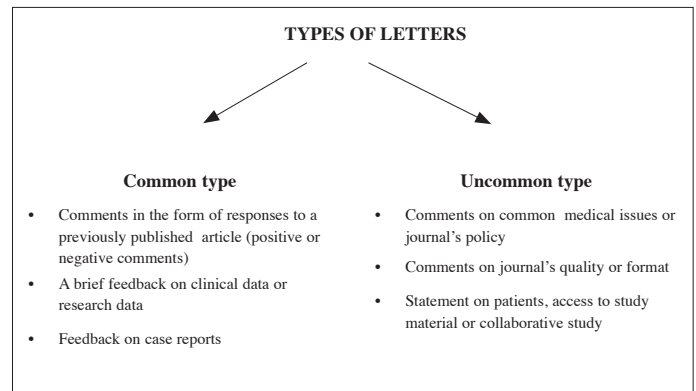


Figure 1. Types of letters

issues, and present additional information which refute or support the assertions of other authors. While writing a letter one should avoid assuming a personal and biased attitude. All suggestions should be made based on scientific data.^[6] It is apparent that general comments not reinforced by logical determinations will be rejected (ie “I think that this is a very important article” or “I think that this article should go to waste”).^[7]

While criticizing articles, a professional, and an elegant approach should be followed. Use of rough, vulgar, pedantic, and pejorative expressions should be avoided. In oral presentations, when question-response time is reached, the same golden rule is also valid. Even if their comments are true or especially true, no one is fond of a vulgar critic. A kind, and a question or humble comment is more effective than a pedantic, and a scornful one. It should not be forgotten that authors of original articles will be invited to respond to your criticisms. It is always easy to respond to an impolite letter, than answering a polite one. Besides, contrary opinions revealed may be concealed “under the noise” of the encounter.^[8]

In most of the journals letters are evaluated as other manuscripts. Submission of a letter, writing rules, and evaluation

Table 2. Frequently encountered problematic issues in letters to the editor

Irrelevant comments on the published article
Reiteration of the points indicated in the original article
General comments
Ambiguous message or conclusion delivered by the letter
Superfluous remarks or details
Unnecessarily long letter
Lack of any new or helpful information
Too many figures or tables
Too many references
Use of aggressive or scornful language
Biased comments
Comments on personality or competency of other authors

Table 3. Important consideration while writing a letter to the editor

It should deliver an understandable message
It should comply with the journal's format
It should contain adequate, and important information about the article
Generally it should be written to deliver objective and constructive comments on published articles
They should be brief, and conclusive

steps resemble to those required for manuscripts.^[9] Most of the editors of the journals expect to receive brief, and clearly comprehensible letters. Generally, certain limits are set. (ie. letters, ≤ 600 words; number of references ≤ 5 , figures or tables none or ≤ 2 , and authors ≤ 5).

Conclusion and Summary

Letters written to the editor or the author should contain objective, and constructive interpretations or discussions on medical, scientific or general areas of interest. They should have an objective, and give a message with a brief, and clear language. Materials which were published or reported elsewhere should not be used. Otherwise, the letter will not be accepted. During writing process of a letter, and a manuscript, frequently encountered problems are summarized in Tables 2, and 3. respectively.

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